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ABSTRACT

This paper describes conditions that enhance planned change efforts in rural secondary schools. The following six conditions are vital to school improvement efforts: (1) teacher commitment; (2) a common understanding of research on best practices; (3) collaborative planning; (4) an egalitarian approach; (5) peer leadership; and (6) support from higher education. A 4-year project in a rural Vermont school district applied the six conditions to school improvement. Teachers in a target secondary school participated in a reflection and collaborative planning process resulting in an action plan for school improvement, which is in the process of being implemented. Teachers in a contrast school are implementing the target school's plan, but did not experience the first five conditions described above. Higher education faculty conducting the study administered a 100-item school climate questionnaire during the past 3 years to faculty in both schools. In Year 1 the contrast school reported stronger instructional leadership and higher expectations for students than in the target school. By Year 3, these differences had disappeared. In Year 3 the target school reported a significant increase in the opportunities students have to learn and their time on task. In Year 1, the contrast school scored significantly higher on decisionmaking than did the target school, but by Year 3 this difference had reversed. (KS)

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CONDITIONS AFFECTING THE RESTRUCTURING OF RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Introduction

During the last decade, reports ranging from "A Nation at Risk" (1983) to "Educating America" (Olson, 1990) have called for a major rethinking and restructuring of our nation's schools. Many reports fail, however, to recognize the complexities involved in instigating change at the individual school level. They ignore the obstacles to improving secondary schools, the roles teachers should play in change efforts, and the special characteristics influencing change in rural communities.

The purpose of this paper is to describe conditions which can enhance planned change efforts in rural secondary schools. We begin with an overview of related studies that emphasize the need to involve teachers as decision-makers in school reform efforts, then present six conditions which we believe are vital to encouraging change in rural secondary schools, and conclude with preliminary results of a planned change project emphasizing these six conditions in two rural secondary schools in Vermont.

Related Studies

Secondary schools are often complex organizations with cultures that are difficult to penetrate and alter.

> They contain many more structural and normative barriers to organizational change, such as departmentalization, individual teacher autonomy, physical isolation and size. On the other hand, they are more loosely coupled and more impervious to simple (and incorrect) solutions than are elementary schools (Fullan, 1990, p. 251).

Some of the features that distinguish secondary schools from elementary schools have been identified by Farrar, 1983; Wilson

and Corcoran, 1988; Fullan, 1990; Firestone, Herriott, and Wilson, 1984 as:

- a wider range of school goals and programs (including academic, athletic, artistic, vocational, and college-preparatory),
- larger faculties with more varied interests and fewer opportunities for communication,
- more complicated teacher and student schedules,
- stronger teacher allegiance to subject areas and departments,
- larger numbers of students seen by each teacher for short periods of the school day,
- more disinterested students who are able to leave school legally,
- increased tracking of students, with different expectations for differently tracked students,
- principals who generally have experience in just one content area and find their broad instructional leadership to therefore be more difficult, and
- decreased parental involvement.

Overcoming these obstacles can be a slow and complex process, "fraught with difficulties" (Farrar, 1983). In recent years, attention has focused on the role teachers play in establishing more effective schools with specific emphasis on shared decision-making, collegiality among teachers, and collaborative teaching (Sarason, 1990; Lieberman, 1990; and

Goodlad, 1987). School-based management, for instance, expresses two beliefs: those most closely affected by school decisions ought to participate in making those decisions, and educational reform efforts will be most effective and long lasting when carried out by people who feel a sense of ownership and responsibility in the process (Lewis, 1989). Such professional collaboration allows teachers and administrators together to build a vision of what their school can be. This vision is essential to changing schools. "Implementing the ideas and ideals of others will always be a half-hearted enterprise" (Barth, 1990, p. 516). But enacting such a vision, that has personal meaning for all in a school, can become a whole-hearted and powerful motive for change.

Teacher involvement in decision-making was highlighted in A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century, a report produced by the Carnegie Forum on Education and Economy in 1986. This publication promoted a specific goal in the fundamental "restructuring" of the entire system by which America educates its children:

> Restructure schools to provide a professional environment for teachers, freeing them to decide how best to meet state and local goals for children while holding them accountable for student progress (p. 55).

Subsequent reports, including the National Governors' Association's 1990 report "Educating America," also have called for greater teacher involvement and creativity in school change efforts. Despite a fundamental understanding of the expanded

role teachers should play in their schools, however, the reports have offered little specific content or suggestion as to how this is to occur. They have failed to note the special challenges rural schools and their teachers may face in trying to improve learning opportunities for all children.

There are still many small rural schools in this nation. Figures from the National Rural, Small Schools Task Force (1988) report approximately 75 percent of all school districts are small (defined as having fewer than 2,500 students) or very small (fewer than 1,000). Moreover, 59% of all districts are rural (defined as at least three-fourths of the enrollment living in a town of less than 2,500 population or in an unincorporated place). 51% of all districts are both small and rural.

Rural schools play a prominent role in their communities. They are often the largest employers in the area, occupy the largest buildings and comprise the largest part of local budgets. Their teachers are frequently seen as "models" for others in and out of school. While rural teachers express satisfaction with the sense of community and their ability to make a difference in their schools, they also voice frustrations. The small size of teaching staffs, limits on time and resources, and the isolation of secondary teachers within their own schools and from the mainstream of professional practice can hinder the willingness of teachers to undertake change efforts. However, the size of rural communities enables teachers and administrators to create more

informal systems and practical ways of getting things done (Carlson, 1990; Cole, 1988). Indeed, small rural schools have been "rediscovered" as models for the schools-within-schools movement in larger, more urban schools.

This paper, though limited in scope and sample, offers insights into conditions that can promote change in rural secondary schools. We are sensitive to the different meanings the term "restructuring" has taken. Raywid's (1990) description of three levels of change is helpful. "Pseudo" reform seeks to maintain the legitimacy of a school with its community through symbolic efforts to respond to problems. "Incremental" reform aims to improve educational practice but recognizes the complex and individual natures of schools and the time and effort needed to institutionalize school change. "Restructuring" describes a fundamental shift from passive to active learning that extensively transforms how schools are organized and how members of the school community interrelate.

We make no pretense that our experience in applying the six conditions of change described in this paper has led to the restructuring of the target school. We do believe, however, that incremental changes are occurring in how individual staff members relate to one another and in the degree to which they participate in decision-making. These changes may provide a basis from which teachers and administrators can continue to fashion and work towards a vision for what their school can be.

Conditions of Change

Three assumptions guide our understanding of the conditions that can enhance change in rural secondary schools. The first is that teachers themselves understand what they need to do improve their effectiveness with young people. By identifying what they want to know and change, teachers are apt to find more meaning in school change activities. The second is that teachers acquire important knowledge and skills from their peers. Teachers, for instance, may become more aware of the perspectives of others, more open to new approaches to learning, more appreciative of individual differences, more skilled in leading groups, and better able to solve problems (Sparks and Loucks-Horsley, 1989). The third is that teachers who take responsibility for their own development may come to believe that they have the capacity and ability to develop their own schools.

Drawing on our experience in rural secondary schools, we believe the following six conditions are vital to school improvement efforts:

1. Teacher commitment. The commitment of a majority of faculty members is a necessary condition for school improvement. In rural settings, this high level of commitment may be particularly important in counteracting the effects of isolation and securing community support for change. Teacher commitment is strengthened when administrators encourage and participate in reflection and planning about school practices, demonstrating their own investment to improvement efforts.

2. A common understanding. Teachers who review research and best practices together, exploring how new ideas can be meaningfully applied in their schools, can arrive at a common value base for approaching school change. They begin to develop a common language, enabling them to discuss and select improvement practices. Rural teachers particularly seem to value learning new instructional approaches from peers who teach in similiar settings and confront familiar issues.

3. Collaborative planning. A collaborative planning process can help teachers and administrators to identify and solve school problems in their communities. Building on commitment and a common base of understanding, the process draws on the contributions of all participants to generate specific school goals and steps to achieve these goals, and to identify the resources and administrative and community support necessary for implementation. Rural teachers may require more time than their more urban counterparts to understand and decide how their schools might change, given the need to take into account community issues and to feel assured that any new responsibilities are meaningful and will not overwhelm their already busy schedules. Plans should pace change incrementally over time to address these issues.

4. An egalitarian approach. Egalitarian relationships may be particularly important to accomplishing planned change in rural areas. With small numbers of people on school faculties, teachers and principals have a vested interest in listening to

and trusting each other as partners in school change. Together they can identify areas of inquiry, take responsibility for leading discussions and presentations to their peers, assume equal roles with administrators in collaborative planning, and decide appropriate implementation and evaluation activities. Administrators, however, have only one voice and one vote in these reflection and planning processes.

5. Peer leadership. Teachers who step forward and provide leadership commit themselves more fully to change. As part of small faculties, rural teachers are often asked to take charge of school activities. Yet they are not usually perceived as leaders. In reflection and planning to improve schools, teachers should consciously be recognized as leaders and assume responsiblity for implementing action plans. Teacher-leaders can then motivate other colleagues by example to consider and try new practices. They are able to identify resources needed by other teachers in implementing a change and provide a framework for evaluating the change from their first-hand experience with it.

6. Support from higher education. University faculty have an important role to play in facilitating change in small rural communities which traditionally have had few resources to draw upon for change. By helping teachers engage in reflection and inquiry about topics they identify, by providing a structure for collaborative planning and identification of program resources, and by fostering peer leadership, university faculty can leave behind a base from which schools can continue to grow.

Application of Conditions

The six conditions explored above have been applied as part of an educational change project in a rural Vermont school district. The purpose of the four-year project, which began in September, 1988, is to discover an effective way for teachers to coordinate their use of a variety of educational strategies in order to meet the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities. Teachers in a target secondary school participated in a reflection and collaborative planning process resulting in an action plan for school improvement. They are now in the process of implementing it. Teachers in a contrast school are implementing the target school's plan.

The target and contrast schools are located in neighboring small communities dependent on agricultural and small business activity. Both schools serve grades 7-12. The target school has approximately 250 students and 22 full-time teachers; the contrast school has approximately 370 students and 30 full-time teachers. There is little teacher turnover in either school. Using the six conditions as a framework, we recount below our experience with the two schools, drawing on annual in-depth interviews with all staff members and participant observations conducted during the past three years.

1. Commitment. After gaining approval from district and school administrators to work in the schools, we approached the faculty of the target school both individually and collectively to explain our project and invite their participation. Teachers

reacted negatively and positively, often at the same time. They were suspicious of university faculty wanting to work in the school and could not believe that we did not have a particular program or curriculum to "sell." Yet they were appreciative of our "coming to them" (the university is an hour's drive away) and actually "asking us what we want to learn."

Half of the faculty in the target school committed themselves to the project. Their participation seemed to hinge on three factors: time available after school and apart from family and extracurricular responsibilities, energy remaining after meeting regular teaching duties (including the state mandated completion of an extensive school approval process during the first year of the project), and incentives offered by the project, particularly three graduate credits for the reflection and planning experiences. The principal, in his second year at the school, also decided to participate as a way to establish more more collegial relationships with his staff.

Maintaining commitment in the target school has been difficult due to two circumstances. The principal became seriously ill during the collaborative planning process, which not only delayed completion and implementation of the school plan but also affected the overall morale of the school. After a brief recovery, when the project began to regain its momentum, the principal suffered a relapse causing him to take a permanent disability leave. Teachers have told us that they have experienced so much change during the past year, coping with his

illness and the transition to an acting principal, that they find it difficult to continue their commitment to further change in the school at this time.

A further complication has been increased community dissatisfaction with the target school, as evidenced by the need for four town votes this past year to approve a school budget. The town has extremely limited financial resources, and state funding has decreased. After a period of community support when teacher salaries in the district were increased to the state average, "voters are now taking it out on teachers and our schools." Teachers feel vulnerable and subject to attack; some are even asking "why should I invest a lot of time in making this school better when this community does not appreciate us at all?"

2. Common understanding. A series of twelve four-hour, after-school seminars were offered at a site nearby the target school over the course of one year. The first seven seminars were designed to foster a common understanding of issues that teachers identified as being important for study and reflection: how students learn differently, the challenge of special education, encouraging higher thinking skills, rethinking heterogeneous grouping, the home-school relationship, the advantages of being small and rural, and developing personally and professionally. Educators from similiar rural schools with varying experiences and perspectives about these issues served as guest speakers. Readings and case studies were completed by teachers in advance and used as a basis for conversation and

reflection by the entire group, with discussion leadership rotating among group members. At the end of each seminar, participants summarized their ideas about how the issues could be addressed meaningfully by the school. One seminar, scheduled for a regular in-service day, was attended by all faculty members as a way to keep them informed about the issues raised in the seminars and draw them into the study and reflection process.

Participants reported great satisfaction with the seminars. They said they had never before had the opportunity to "really talk" with colleagues to understand their educational philosophies and expectations for students. The sessions exposed teachers to new ideas and practices, but "didn't force us to do something we weren't ready to do." And unlike in-service workshops "which we never have any say about," teachers said they were able to study things they wanted to learn. Perhaps the most important result was that teachers found that they shared common values about teaching young people. Teachers said they found strength in simply knowing others in their school had similiar perspectives and goals regarding teaching.

3. Collaborative planning. The final five seminars held during the one-year period emphasized collaborative planning. The first of these sessions was a day-long meeting of the entire school faculty to establish goals for the school that would serve as guides for school improvement planning. In the next four seminars, participants developed action plans for achieving these goals. These plans identified specific activities, timetables,

persons responsible and evaluation processes for implementation. Despite delays caused by the illness of the principal, participants again expressed satisfaction with the planning process and their ability to fashion a plan that responded to their perceptions of school needs and their study and reflection into alternatives towards meeting these needs.

4. An egalitarian process. Participants in the seminars included adminstrators, teachers, and support staff. Each had one vote and each provided important contributions to the reflection and planning processes. Participants also reported a "spill-over effect" into other areas of school decision-making. Until the most recent illness of the principal, teachers said they were consulted more about issues, given a formal role in selecting new staff, and provided support when they wanted to develop new learning opportunities for their students. When the principal became ill, they were "ready to pitch in" and work as a team until he "could get back on his feet."

What has proven most difficult in establishing a more egalitarian process is the lack of ownership among staff members not participating in the seminars. Though consulted at regular intervals, these staff members never truly felt part of the process and are less certain about the action plans developed by their colleagues. Momentum in addressing the concerns of the "reluctant" staff members has been lost during the extended illness of the principal and will now be difficult to regain in the face of community issues affecting the school.

5. Peer leadership. Three staff members have stepped forward to take leadership roles in implementing and revising the action plans. Without this leadership, it is doubtful that work on the plans would proceed. In order to not change "too much, too fast," and cognizant of the morale of the school, these peer leaders have elected to focus and build on one goal at a time. They say that change has to occur "at their pace" and "on our own terms" for the time being.

Symbolizing the emergence of peer leadership in the school has been the naming of "one of them" as acting principal. This teacher has consciously approached the position, her first in an administrative capacity, as a "team member" drawing on her peers for support and direction. Teachers unanimously report their satisfaction with her performance and feel "for the first time in a long time" that "somebody really values us as teachers."

6. Support from higher education. The regular presence of university faculty in the school has been critical to building a common understanding for change and providing a structure for collaborative planning to continue. Where teachers were initially suspicious of us, they are now welcoming. They say they "trust" us because we have not "pushed the latest change on the bandwagon down our throats." They say we have listened to them. Given the resources of the community, it is unlikely that the target school would have had the capacity to engage teachers in reflection and planning without this project. As part of the project, we have also provided needed encouragement and

assistance, as identified and communicated by teacher-leaders, in the implementation of their school plan.

Technical assistance is available to the contrast school in the implementation of the target school plan. The contrast school did not experience the first five conditions described above, essentially the reflection and planning processes. They were simply asked to participate in plan implementation. As we had hypothesized, the lack of ownership has made the contrast school reluctant to use "someone else's plans." While certain teachers have elected to participate in one of the target school's three primary implementation activities (a series of practical and hands-on staff development courses), most have ignored this and other support opportunities. Interestingly, teachers in the contrast school share similiar school goals with teachers in the target school. The contrast school teachers are even pursuing the other two target school implementation activities (a student advisory system and short community courses) independent of the project. But they want to do it "in our own way" according to "who their school is and what we need to do."

Preliminary Results

How do we know the six conditions described in this paper are meaningful to our understanding of how schools change? In addition to teacher interview and participant data, we have administered a 100-item school climate questionnaire developed by

the State of Connecticut, Department of Education (1984), during the past three years. This questionnaire groups teacher responses in three areas: school effectiveness, school climate and equity. Results are presented in Table 1. The sample size varies from 100% in Year 1 (including part-time staff members) to 77% in Year 3. The decrease is primarily due to teacher refusal to complete the lengthy questionnaire.

Significant differences ($p < .05$) were found in several characteristics of the schools. In Year 1 the contrast school reported stronger instructional leadership and higher expections for students than in the target school. By Year 3, these differences had disappeared. In Year 3 the target school reported a significant increase in the opportunities students have to learn and their time on task.

Of particular interest are teacher responses to questions regarding their involvement in decision-making and the trust and respect present in interactions with other teachers (consideration). In Year 1, the contrast school scored significantly higher on decision-making than did the target school. By Year 3 this difference had reversed with the target school reporting significantly higher scores in both decision-making and consideration. Most importantly, there was a significant difference in both these characteristics in the target school between Year 1 and Year 2. The increases were maintained in Year 3.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF TEACHER RESPONSES TO SCHOOL CLIMATE QUESTIONNAIRE IN TARGET AND CONTRAST SCHOOLS

CHARACTERISTICS	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3	
	Target	Contrast	Target	Contrast	Target	Contrast
(Sample Size)	(25)	(34)	(28)	(30)	(17)	(22)
SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS						
Safe/Orderly Environment	3.40	3.52	3.43	3.68*	3.44	3.25
Clear School Mission	3.30	3.55	3.52	3.62	3.58	3.51
Instructional Leadership	2.79	3.16*	3.09	3.39*	2.94	2.93
High Expectations	2.97	3.32*	3.20	3.42	3.12	3.22
Opp. to Learn/ Time on Task	3.15	3.17	3.31	3.15	3.31*	2.84
Freq. Monitoring of Pupil Progress	3.00	3.09	3.01	3.17	3.09	3.06
Home-School Relations	3.01	3.12	3.06	3.12	3.07	2.94
SCHOOL CLIMATE						
Decision-making	3.16	3.47*	3.54	3.52	3.71*	3.14
Consideration	3.63	3.68	3.89	3.70	3.85*	3.38
Academic Press	3.04	3.17	3.19	3.21	3.17	2.95
Academic Growth and Renewal	3.46	3.81*	3.52	3.71	3.51	3.55
EQUITY	3.47	3.51	3.54	3.63	3.51	3.39

*For this year, the Target and Contrast schools differ significantly, $p < .05$. On a response scale of 1-5, 1 is low and 5 is high.

Questionnaire developed by the State of Connecticut, Department of Education, 1984.

Discussion

We believe these findings show that the conditions described in this paper have actually led to teacher greater collaboration and involvement in decision-making in the target school. Despite difficulties resulting from the serious illness of the principal and adverse conditions in the community, there is a strong foundation for school change emphasizing teacher collaboration and decision-making. We believe, however, that change has a pace of its own that is determined by local context. When teachers say they are not ready to change any further, we must listen and remain alert for the time when they will be ready again. In rural areas, where schools serve as a community focus, change may regularly "stop and start," depending on the issues facing each school. A process that allows teachers to study and reflect, and then act through planning, may provide the flexibility and the responsibility for teachers to serve as partners in efforts to change and improve schools.

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